

**Testimony provided to
Committee on Transportation & Infrastructure
Subcommittee on Highways, Transit, and Pipelines
Thomas E. Pitre, Chairman**

**Submitted By:
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Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, on behalf of the State of Louisiana Department of Transportation, I am honored to submit this written testimony to the United States House of Representatives' Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, Subcommittee on Highways, Transit and Pipelines. It means a great deal to me to testify before the highest level of government and to represent the citizens of Louisiana. This testimony is in response to the need for Congress to appreciate the state's perspective on the rebuilding of Louisiana after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Appropriations Request

LA DOTD offers to the Congress a reasonable and relevant request for \$32.6 billion in special appropriations to help rebuild Louisiana's transportation infrastructure and hurricane protection systems to meet the needs as redefined by Katrina and Rita. This request addresses the components needed to restore our infrastructure and better prepare the state for future events through key transportation and hurricane protection investments.

We have separated the request into three categories: (1) requests specific to the recovery effort from Katrina and Rita; (2) critical transportation needs in preparation for future events; and (3) critical hurricane protection/flood control needs in preparation for future events. For the purposes of this testimony, I have removed the specific details of the items in this request, but the details and methodology used to determine the needs and costs are available upon request.

The first category, "Hurricane Recovery," refers directly to damage resulting from the hurricanes, such as repairing or replacing damaged roads, bridges, public ports, airports, railroads, the maritime and transit systems. It also includes services that have been interrupted or permanently affected because of the damage. This section also addresses the gridlock that has formed in other areas of the state as a result of the relocations of evacuees. Projects in this category are vital to the rebuilding effort and are estimated at \$5.5 billion.

"Critical Transportation Needs for Future Events" includes projects to ensure the state is adequately prepared to address future hurricanes or natural disasters. Capacity projects such as road widening, interstate elevation, and development of additional evacuation routes are included in this category. Total "future events" are estimated at \$5.1 billion.

The final section is the funding of "Critical Hurricane and Flood Protection Needs for Future Events," which includes levee protection and pumping capacity. This category is the most complicated and most expensive component of this request, but it also is the best investment to ensure the widespread damage caused by unmerciful floodwaters does not happen again. The total estimate is \$22 billion, and the work is expected to take many years to complete. The state would like to work collaboratively with the federal government to develop a long-term plan for spreading this cost over the next 10 to 15 years.

Critical Issues for Congress to consider

Immediate Release of Emergency Relief Funds

As important as the funding is to the rebuilding process, there are some imperative, critical issues that must be addressed if we are to be successful. The first issue involves an urgent need for an

immediate appropriation of \$100 million in emergency funds. The cost of emergency repairs is rapidly approaching a rate of approximately \$1 million per day, and LA DOTD simply does not have the cash flow to continue this spending pace for an extended period of time. We do not even have sufficient funds to pay for the emergency repairs already underway.

Because of the numerous short-term extensions of TEA-21, it was necessary to advance construct many projects to maintain a consistent, stable highway program. Consequently, our cash reserves are substantially diminished, necessitating immediate access to federal funds. We have requested the quick release of \$100 million in FHWA Emergency Relief funds to address this issue. However, it is our understanding that the FHWA Emergency Relief account has been nearly depleted by previous events and was never replenished by Congress, which may explain why FHWA has only allocated \$5 million thus far. Our cash flow problems will become acute in December 2005.

Timeliness of FEMA Reimbursement

Damage to road and bridge infrastructure not normally eligible for federal aid is \$360 million, according to our current estimate. Some of this infrastructure is owned by the state; much of it is not. It is imperative that FEMA reimburse both LA DOTD and local governmental transportation agencies in a timely manner. With damage of unprecedented magnitude, cash flow will become a critical issue for state and local governments if reimbursement of eligible expenses is not prompt. Without swift reimbursement, we cannot pay our bills nor can we conduct business. These first two issues are of the utmost importance to the reconstruction effort.

Waiver of Maximum Limit on FHWA Emergency Relief Funds

Federal law limits FHWA Emergency Relief funding to \$100 million per state for each natural disaster or catastrophic failure event. The destruction from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita is unprecedented. The cost to repair and replace the Twin Span Bridge far exceeds \$100 million. Our current estimate of damage repair costs to federal-aid highways in Louisiana is \$1.1 billion. A waiver of the \$100 million limit on FHWA Emergency Relief funding is critical to the recovery.

Waiver of 180-Day Limit for 100 Percent Reimbursement with Emergency Relief Funds

Under current Federal law, costs incurred within the first 180 days of a disaster are reimbursed fully. Upon expiration of the 180-day period, the federal share is reduced to 90 percent for interstate highway repair work and 80 percent for all other federal-aid routes. Due to the magnitude of the disaster and the fact that some areas were not immediately accessible, it will not be possible for LA DOTD to complete emergency repair work on all qualified projects within 180 days. For these reasons, a waiver of this provision or an extension of the deadline is needed. Furthermore, without an extension, our regular highway program will be in jeopardy due to a lack of state matching funds.

Potential Dispute with FHWA and FEMA over Extent of Roadway Damage

Estimates of permanent repairs to highway infrastructure are being prepared in the parishes comprising the New Orleans Metropolitan Area. In Jefferson, Orleans, Plaquemines and St. Bernard parishes, much of the roadway network was submerged for at least several days and in

many cases for weeks. Many of the roadways may appear undamaged and thus may appear as though no permanent repairs are required. However, it is our opinion (as supported by technical information) that the base of the submerged roadways has been undermined or otherwise substantially weakened because of saturation. Once traffic, particularly truck traffic, returns to these roadways, pavement failures (e.g. potholes, ruts, etc.) will become evident. Removing the surface to effect base repairs and then repaving will be expensive but necessary. The FHWA and FEMA may resist recognizing these pavement failures as disaster-related damage since they will not be immediately apparent. The FHWA already has indicated it will not accept any type of testing to determine damage in advance of actual pavement failure. This damage could potentially affect nearly 500 miles of federal-aid roads (FHWA) and approximately 1,500 miles of non federal-aid roads (FEMA). The funding at stake is estimated at \$557 million (\$340 million for federal-aid routes and \$217 million for non federal-aid routes).

Replacement of the I-10 Twin Span Bridge

Although LA DOTD is repairing the I-10 Twin Span Bridge to re-establish interstate traffic, it is prudent to replace the bridge with a structure that is not susceptible to the kind of damage experienced during Katrina. The bridge was constructed more than 40 years ago and was originally intended to be a six-lane facility with no shoulders. It was striped for four lanes with shoulders due to safety concerns. The roadway on either side is six lanes; thus, the Twin Spans are a bottleneck in the Interstate highway network. For bridges that require replacement, the Emergency Relief program provides for the upgrade of the facility to meet projected 20-year traffic demand. Therefore, we are requesting inclusion of a specification for six lanes in a direct appropriation, which is what Florida received last year after Hurricane Ivan left similar damage on its I-10 bridge. It is essential that we start the bridge replacement project early next year. We cannot afford any delays.

Population Surge in Baton Rouge, Lafayette, Houma and Hammond

The mass evacuation and relocation of the New Orleans Metropolitan Area has resulted in a surge in population, particularly in the Baton Rouge area, but also in Lafayette, Houma and Hammond. Consequently, many of the highways and streets in these areas are in gridlock. While some of the evacuees already are returning home, others will remain for years; some will stay permanently. Immediate transportation improvements are needed to cope with this population influx. Most of these improvements are short-term, stopgap measures that can be (and already are being) implemented quickly. We are not concerned with whether the money is appropriated through the FHWA or FEMA as long as reimbursement is timely. We are already incurring costs in dealing with this issue.

Waiver of Air Quality Conformity Requirement for Transportation Projects

The Baton Rouge area, which absorbed the largest number of evacuees, is presently in “lapse” status for transportation under the Clean Air Act, meaning that we cannot proceed with any regionally significant highway projects. Because of the recent surge in population, we are unable to conduct an accurate air quality analysis to demonstrate air quality conformity. Therefore, we need EPA to accept an analysis based on pre-Katrina socio-economic conditions and travel patterns, or we need Congress to provide a conformity determination waiver for four years, similar to the waiver granted to New York City after the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001.

A bill (H.R. 3946) to provide a waiver for Baton Rouge has been introduced in the House of Representatives.

Critical Flood Protection Needs

It is our understanding that the Corps of Engineers has already been appropriated \$1.3 billion for repairs to the flood protection system, including repairing levee breaches, strengthening weak points in the levees, and repairing damaged control structures. This repair work will restore the levee system to the previous level of protection by June 1, 2006 (the beginning of the next hurricane system). It is imperative that these repairs be made promptly. It is also crucial that the entire levee system in coastal Louisiana be completed and upgraded to withstand a Category 5 hurricane. Our current estimate for this work is \$22 billion from Morgan City, Louisiana to Slidell, Louisiana. We are evaluating the section of coast from Texas to Morgan City to determine the level of protection needed and the associated cost.

Anticipated Increases in Construction Costs

Prior to the hurricanes, construction costs were increasing significantly, primarily because of the demand for materials. The massive reconstruction effort along the Gulf Coast will undoubtedly magnify this problem. While it is not possible to quantify the cost increase at this time, those involved in the recovery need to be cognizant of the impact this will have on repair projects as well as already-planned construction projects. Based on the results of a few recent bids and internal discussions regarding the vastness of the devastation, the potential strain on contractors (materials, equipment, and labor), and soaring fuel costs, a contingency of 15 percent is recommended for budgetary purposes.

These critical issues must be addressed if Louisiana is to recover from this devastation.

The People of DOTD

The focus of this testimony has dealt primarily with facts and figures, but I also must take a moment to tell you about the men and women of my department and the examples they displayed of individual leadership in the immediate moments following the disaster. The employees of LA DOTD, many of whom lost all of their worldly possessions, were as shocked as everyone else in America to see the destruction and feel the heartbreak that resulted from these cruel storms. The difference is that, during those first weeks, the employees of LA DOTD didn't get to see those scenes of devastation on television. We were working. We were clearing the roads of literal mountains of debris that included wood, metal, automobiles, fast food signs, playground equipment and pieces of houses. We were inspecting and repairing the roads and bridges. We were helping plug the levee breaches and pump the water out of the city. We did the hard work that needed to be done, and we continue to do it today.

LA DOTD employees work with an almost desperate sense of urgency. To us, those aren't just damaged roads and bridges – they are part of our neighborhoods. Those mountains of debris are pieces of what used to be our friends' lives. LA DOTD actually has no statutory responsibility to fix levee breaches or help pump canal and lake water from New Orleans, but we had a higher responsibility. This is our home, and we have no choice but to do the work.

I want to tell you about Mike Stack, an LA DOTD engineer who works in our New Orleans district. Mike was in Baton Rouge on Monday, where he had evacuated his family to safety before Katrina hit, when he heard that the 17th Street Canal levee had been breached. At daylight on Tuesday morning, Mike was back in New Orleans, standing on the levee, watching 15 to 20 feet of water rush through a 500-foot opening. Water was everywhere. Everything was underwater – the roads, vehicles, buildings and homes – except for one bridge that crossed the canal about 1000 feet north of the breach. Mike began coordinating a sandbag drop into the breach to stop the water from destroying any more homes. The process was very inefficient, mostly because Mike only had access to one helicopter. Mike came up with another plan - build a road from the bridge to the breach so trucks and heavy equipment could reach the site. By begging and borrowing equipment, supplies and volunteers, Mike organized a “scavenger plan” to take broken concrete and other fill material on the west side of the canal and use it as a base for a road on the east side. Knowing that it would take a while to build the road, Mike devised an interim measure – drive sheet piling into the canal bed from one side to the other to block the flow of lake water.

Communications were very poor; cell phones and radios weren’t working, and most landlines had been knocked out. The only way Mike could talk with emergency officials in Baton Rouge was to go to a nearby building in Metairie that still had a landline phone, call his wife on her cell phone, who then could contact the emergency operations center. Through this process, Mike was able to line up a contractor, who eventually worked directly with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to stop the lake water flow.

Within 48 hours, Mike’s makeshift road was a reality, and trucks and equipment moved in to help fix the breach.

A few weeks later, the watermarks showed the flood had reached the roofline on Mike Stack’s house. Mike wasn’t surprised. He lived just a few blocks from the breach, and he knew that first day that his home was gone. Mike worked on that levee breach day and night, even though he knew it was too late to save his own house. No one ordered Mike to work on the levee. It wasn’t his job, and it wasn’t LA DOTD’s job. He did it because that is what he does. He sees a problem, he fixes it. He was working to save other people’s homes and other people’s lives.

Mike didn’t fix the breach. He was one person working with other dedicated people from different agencies, including the Orleans and Jefferson Parish Levee Boards and the Corps of Engineers. But if Mike had not put aside his personal situation to help others, that breach would not have been fixed as quickly. Mike Stack didn’t pull people from rooftops into a helicopter, but his actions helped save countless lives by giving those rescuers just a little more time by stopping the flood waters just a little sooner. I am proud to work with Mike Stack.

That kind of can-do attitude was on full display when LA DOTD began an ambitious project to repair the I-10 Twin Span Bridge that connects New Orleans to Slidell over Lake Pontchartrain. Katrina shoved an enormous storm surge from the Gulf of Mexico directly into the lake. That surge ravaged the 42-year-old bridge, tossing 300-ton concrete segments into the water like so many dominoes. Both spans of the 5.4-mile bridge were severely damaged, with nearly half of the concrete segments either misaligned or destroyed.

LA DOTD engineers quickly assembled a team to assess the damage and develop a strategy on repairing the bridge. With the generous help of engineers from the Florida Department of

Transportation, our team put together a plan that seemed impossible: We would advertise for bids, approve a contract and re-establish two-way traffic on one span of the bridge within 45 days of awarding the contract.

Work started on Sept. 12, exactly two weeks after Katrina hit. This was not an easy job. A barge carrying a huge crane had to be re-positioned continuously around the spans to pick up fallen concrete segments. Some of the segments were too badly damaged to be re-used. All had to be inspected. Some of the concrete segments had hit the pilings as they fell from the bridge, so the pilings had to be inspected before new segments could be re-mounted. Work stopped while a communications cable that crossed the lake was re-positioned. Then, Hurricane Rita hit. All work ceased on Thursday, September 22 so workers could get to safety. After Rita passed through, the water level in Lake Pontchartrain was too high to keep working. It was Monday afternoon before the contractor could get back on the job. To outsiders, that 45-day schedule was starting to look like wishful thinking.

If you count 45 days from September 12, that takes you to today, October 27. Today was the original deadline for getting two-way traffic re-established on the bridge. That did not happen today. It happened on October 14, almost two weeks ago. U.S. Department of Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta joined Governor Kathleen Blanco and me that warm day as we took down the barricades and let the traffic come through. We did it ahead of schedule because we set the bar high and found a great partner in our Louisiana contractor, Boh Brothers, who worked around the clock to get that bridge repaired. That's the kind of commitment LA DOTD has to rebuilding Louisiana. Not only did we finish the job early, we did it nearly \$20 million under our original estimate. I want you to know that every dollar we receive from the federal government to restore our infrastructure will be spent with the same care and diligence we displayed by saving \$20 million on that bridge repair. That's the kind of commitment LA DOTD has to spending those tax dollars wisely.

There are many other areas in which LA DOTD is making an impact and working to get citizens' lives back to normal. We are still picking up debris – so far, LA DOTD and its contractors have removed more than 1 million cubic yards of debris – enough to fill more than 33,000 standard garbage trucks.

Our customer service call center, which did not even exist before Katrina hit, has received more than 10,000 calls from citizens who are looking for every kind of information imaginable, from road closures to disaster relief help to shelter information.

LA DOTD is on the ground every day, repairing and replacing traffic signals and signs to make sure travel is safe once people return to their communities. Our inspection teams are in the affected areas, assessing damages to the infrastructure and working side-by-side with federal officials to document storm damage and estimated repair or replacement costs. We also are working closely with local officials, helping them assess damage and estimate repair costs to their infrastructures.

LA DOTD is not only working hard, it is working smart. Long before Katrina and Rita hit, our employees began working on a process improvement initiative, a detailed analysis of the processes that drive our work and how we can improve them. Through employee-driven process improvement teams, we began finding more efficient ways to do our work, ways to get more done within existing resources.

As a result of this initiative, we announced last Spring that we would trim our workforce by about 500 positions, primarily if not exclusively through attrition. We estimate this action should save Louisiana taxpayers an extra \$20-Million Dollars each year. We intend to use that extra money to keep a robust statewide program moving forward in the face of increasing costs and the declining value of the gasoline tax.

LA DOTD employees continue to share a commitment to work hard and work smart for our citizens, but the truth is that we cannot do it alone. That is why I am here today, to tell you how you can help my state, our citizens, in this darkest of times.

In closing, I acknowledge that rebuilding south Louisiana is personal for me. I was born and raised in Grand Isle, Louisiana's only inhabited barrier island. My hometown was hit pretty hard by Katrina and Rita, and a lot of my friends and family members took a beating. Louisiana is home for me, and I take what happened very personally. But you don't have to be from Louisiana to fully appreciate what rebuilding this wonderful state means to the rest of the country.

The Mississippi River is why New Orleans is where it is. New Orleans is one of the busiest ports in the world, thanks in no small part to America's farmers. Without a viable port near the mouth of the river, the pain will be felt by more than a few thousand dock workers. The whole country will experience the economic impact as markets dry up, trading partners look elsewhere for goods and our citizens have a hard time getting goods they always had taken for granted. Private industry is playing a large role in the recovery, but the scale of destruction demands federal action.

Other Louisiana transportation needs have national impact. Louisiana is one of only two states that has six Class One railroads. New Orleans is a major railroad gateway, and as members of Congress involved in our country's infrastructure challenges, you know how important the rail business is. Without it, truck traffic would dramatically increase on our interstates, clogging an already overburdened road system and prompting calls for increased spending on highways. Louis Armstrong International Airport is a major commercial airport for business and personal travel. Interstate 10 is one of this nation's most important highways, linking some of the state's largest population areas and passing through the heart of the affected areas in Louisiana. LA 1, the two-lane road through South-Central Louisiana, is the only way in or out of Port Fourchon, the nerve center for the Louisiana Offshore Oil Port, or LOOP. LOOP distributes about 18 percent of the country's oil and gas to refineries, making it a major national economic asset. Imagine what will happen to gasoline prices if our ability to fully utilize this strategic infrastructure is compromised because we delayed rebuilding a sub-standard road.

In closing, I want to reiterate that the request we put before you is a valid, reasonable and relevant request for federal help. It is specific in its scope and is supported by data. I am not asking for a blank check. I am asking that you join us as full partners in what can be an exhilarating experience of turning tragedy into triumph. We have the opportunity to work side-by-side to accomplish one of the greatest feats ever. I hope you will join us on this journey and give serious and thoughtful consideration to our requests.

Thank you for your time.